

The Dallas Morning News: Texas motorists, beware: Rules of road changing

The rules of the road are changing again, and everyone from parents of young children and teenage drivers to pistol-packing motorists should take heed. The Legislature passed dozens of laws that affect motorists, and most of the changes took effect Thursday. Among those most affected are young drivers. Law enforcement officers may now issue tickets to some teenage drivers if they are caught using a cellphone, pager or other wireless communication device within the first six months of obtaining a provisional license, which is issued to drivers younger than 18. Recently licensed youths can still carry cellphones and other devices in their cars, but they must pull off the road before using them, said Texas Department of Public Safety spokesman Tom Vinger. "We're simply trying to take away the distractions," he said. "That's a big issue with young drivers. They're very easily distracted." Two years ago, the Legislature passed other laws designed to limit distractions to new drivers, but the law does not permit officers to stop motorists solely for those offenses. The other laws dealing with distractions restrict the hours that drivers under age 18 may be on the road and stipulate that drivers under age 18 cannot have more than one non-related passenger under age 21 when driving. Young drivers also will face new hurdles if they want to keep moving violations off their records. A new law requires judges to order drivers younger than 25 to complete a driving safety course if they are cited for a moving violation but want to keep the offense off their records. In addition, judges must order drivers younger than 18 to take a Texas DPS road test as a condition of keeping the citation off their records. If the safety course or road test are not completed, the traffic violation will remain on their driving record. Another new law provides for a six-month driver's license suspension for anyone convicted of providing alcohol to a minor, and another new measure makes it a Class C misdemeanor for anyone younger than 21 to use a fake ID to buy alcohol. "Hopefully this will make people think twice," Mr. Vinger said. Parents of young children should take note of a new law that expands the use of car safety seats. The new law requires all children under age 5 and shorter than 3 feet tall to use a safety seat. Previously, the law applied to children up to age 4. As important, however, is a new provision that makes a child safety seat infraction a moving violation. It sends a stronger message, Mr. Vinger said, because it can now affect a person's driving record. Highlights of other new laws: *Drivers of commercial vehicles that do not cover loads of rock or trash with tarps could face fines of up to \$500. *A new driver's license-based organ donor education and registry program will be created, but officials have few specifics. *The state may adopt 80-mph speed limits in certain counties, but none are in North Texas. *On the opposite end of the speeding spectrum, cities now can lower residential speed limits from 30 mph to 25. Finally, House Bill 823 tries to describe when motorists are deemed to be traveling and therefore may carry a handgun in their vehicle without having a concealed-handgun permit. DPS troopers have been briefed on the new law and in most cases will not arrest armed motorists as long as they are not suspected of involvement in any other crime above a Class C misdemeanor, Mr. Vinger said. The gun also must not be in plain sight. Throughout the state, however, police and prosecutors may view the law differently, Mr. Vinger warned. The law can be viewed as more of a defense to prosecution, which does not limit an officer's ability to arrest a person for weapons violations and then have the matter addressed in court. "It may not be an argument you can win on the side of the road," Mr. Vinger said. * Which workplaces offer the best benefits to commuters? The North Texas Clean Air Coalition is accepting nominations for its second annual **North Texas Best Workplaces for Commuters** list. Last year, 32 organizations were recognized for meeting EPA standards that promote commuting. Organizations can apply at www.northtexasair.org. Tony Hartzel can be reached at thartzel@dallasnews.com and at P.O. Box 655237, Dallas, Texas 75265